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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A plan to sell Saudi Arabia highly accurate Boeing Co bomb-guidance kits is roiling Israel's backers in the Congress, setting up a potential clash with President George W. Bush.

The administration could formally notify lawmakers as soon as January 15 of the possible sale to Riyadh of Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or JDAM, technology.

As many as 253 members of the 435-seat House of Representatives have signed bipartisan warnings to Bush about such a sale to Saudi Arabia, still in a formal state of war with Israel.

The projected deal involves tail kits that turn unguided bombs into precision munitions with built-in satellite and motion-sensor navigation systems.

"You have the makings of a resolution of disapproval," said Rep. Mark Kirk, an Illinois Republican pushing for measures to curb what he considers the JDAM's risk to Israel and U.S. forces in the region.

Kirk is a naval reservist who serves a weekend a month as deputy director of intelligence in the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon. In a telephone interview on Wednesday, he said he was waiting for the administration to propose measures "to prevent these systems from ever being a threat to Americans or Israel."

Kirk cited possible political assurances, special arrangements with the Saudi government or "anything else they can think of."

The State Department originally planned to notify Congress of a possible JDAM sale early in

December, but delayed that to January 15 at the request of senior House members who wanted to scrutinize it after their winter break.

Under U.S. law, Congress has 30 days to block an arms sale after receiving formal notice. In 1986, then-President Ronald Reagan dropped plans to sell shoulder-launched "Stinger" missiles to Riyadh after the House and Senate objected.

By showing strong opposition during informal consultations, lawmakers also have prompted the scaling back of other planned sales to Saudi Arabia starting in the early 1990s, according to a September 12 Congressional Research Service report.

STRATEGIC DRIVE

The JDAM sale would be part of a combined \$20 billion or so in fresh U.S. arms sales to Gulf Arab states described by Washington as a strategic drive to counter Iran's growing might.

Rep. Anthony Weiner, a New York Democrat, said he and 35 other House members plan to introduce a measure aimed at blocking a JDAM sale "the minute Congress is officially notified."

In the Senate, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden of Delaware, a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, also has voiced qualms.

"My committee's looking very closely into this," he told reporters in a December 4 conference call. "Thus far, the justification for the sale has not been made to me."

In July, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described planned U.S. sales to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman as a counter to "the negative influences" of al Qaeda and Hezbollah as well as the countries Syria and Iran.

But some lawmakers doubt Saudi Arabia's "reliability as a counterterrorism partner," said Christopher Blanchard, a Middle East expert at the nonpartisan Congressional Research

Service. Their concerns include allegations of terrorist financing and the flow of Saudi fighters to Iraq, he said.

Israel became the first foreign buyer of JDAMs in 2000. Since then, 18 countries have followed, according to Boeing's Web site. The weapon has been used widely in the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia remains the top regional buyer of U.S. weapons, including Boeing F-15 fighter aircraft, United Technologies Corp Black Hawk helicopters, and General Dynamics Corp light armored vehicles, night-vision goggles, thermal weapons sights, and long-range radios.

Riyadh also has bought advanced weapons from Britain's BAE Systems, France's Dassault Aviation and Europe's EADS among other European suppliers.